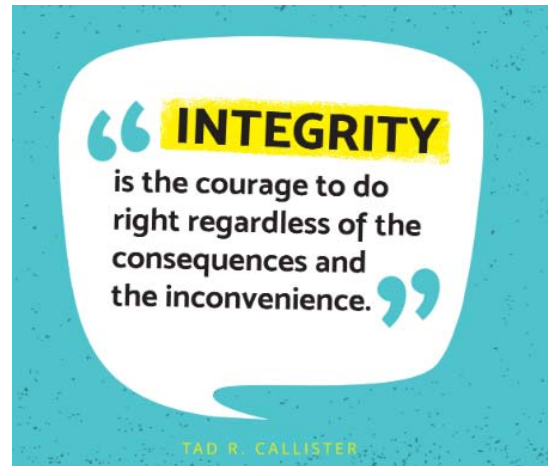
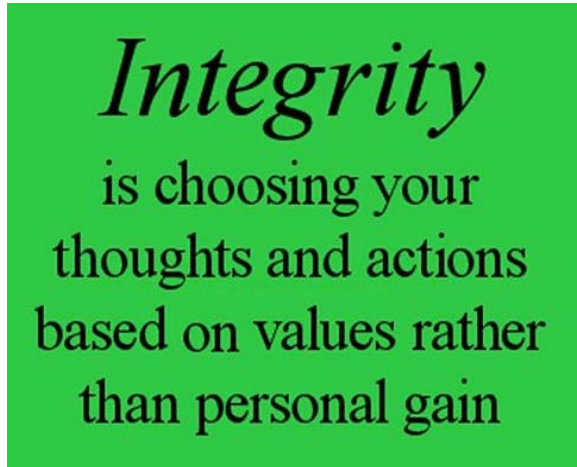


Integrity Still Matters

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1 Chronicles 29:17 – “*Since I know, O my God, that Thou triest the heart and delightest in uprightness, I, in the integrity of my heart have willingly offered all these things;*” (NASB)

“I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things have I given willingly and with honest intent.” (NIV)

King David encouraged himself in the conviction that his integrity was a guaranteed pathway to pleasing God. So often today Christians flounder around without any assurance that they are living lives that are pleasing to their Lord and Savior. What a refreshing concept: We can be confident that **Integrity still matters to God!**

In a culture that has largely rejected moral absolutes, the issue of integrity has become much harder to define. Being “true to oneself” is hardly a very praiseworthy standard since it cannot be compared to any objective, external anchor. What if it is being true to yourself to tell the truth in one situation, but to lie in another? Or to exercise financial responsibility in one realm, but cheat on your taxes?

I prefer definitions that allow for measurement against an unchanging moral code: “Adherence to a code of values; utter sincerity, honesty, and candor; completeness.”

Our political culture has tried to divorce personal character and integrity from having any relevance to one’s ability to govern. From God’s perspective there has never been any such disconnect. When it comes to leadership in the church, integrity lies at the heart of the qualifications that Paul emphasizes:

“An overseer, then, must be above reproach” (1 Timothy 3:2)

Some of the following quotes may help to motivate us towards a life of integrity:

Character is doing the right thing when nobody’s looking. There are too many people who think that the only thing that’s right is to get by, and the only thing that’s wrong is to get caught.

– J.C. Watts

If you have integrity, nothing else matters. If you don’t have integrity, nothing else matters.

– Alan Simpson

I hope I shall possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain what I consider the most enviable of all titles, the character of an honest man.

– George Washington

If honor be your clothing, the suit will last a lifetime; but if clothing be your honor, it will soon be worn threadbare.

– William Arnot

Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless. Knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful.

– Samuel Johnson

For myself personally, integrity has been one of my primary goals – whether in the workplace or in the realm of Christian service. Part of integrity is maintaining your biblical convictions (gained by study of the Word under submission to the Holy Spirit) despite how much opposition and rejection result. I feel that I have been faithful in this regard relative to what I believe about plurality of elder church government – faithful both regarding my understanding of what the NT models as well as faithful regarding the significance of not giving into expediency in this crucial area.

I first became impressed with the distinction between the traditional evangelical church model (which is typically structured around some type of senior pastor role that stands in marked distinction to the role of the other elders) and biblical plurality during my seminary days at **Bethany Bible Chapel** in Winona Lake, IN. There some very godly shepherds demonstrated the type of servant heart, love, humility and mutual respect that are the bedrock for such practice.

Abraham Thomas has gone on to have an amazing ministry in southern India planting churches and training up elders. Grace Seminary at the same time was preparing men to step into professional roles within the traditional ministry framework – so I experienced high level input from both camps simultaneously. I value the tools and the training provided by my seminary professors, but I was impacted far greater by the practical model of a working plurality shepherding ministry in my small local church there.

I have been asked by some to provide a quick synopsis of what plurality is all about – since the concept is now widely embraced in theory ... but still only practiced in rare situations. This is no small task. For those who have the appetite for some more serious study, I suggest **Alexander Strauch**'s work Biblical Eldership, or the practical companion volume Eldership in Action by **Richard H. Swartley**.

Decades ago I wrote my own analysis of the distinction between the type of church government that has multiple elders but a differentiated role for a Senior Pastor (the model advocated by Dr. John MacArthur and most other well-known church leaders today) vs. my understanding of a more biblical plurality model. You can reference this article under Leadership Studies on my website.

Here are some of the major points of distinction:

– **There is one invisible Head of the Church = the Good Shepherd Himself – our Lord Jesus Christ.** Our local church government must model our dependence upon the one head and not fall into the error of worldly leadership which seeks a human visible head — as in the days of Israel — rejecting the theocracy and clamoring for a king. (See my commentary on 1 Samuel.)

Test: Do the people refer to one man as “the pastor” of their church?

– Christ mediates His authority through a **local group of qualified elders** (based on the character qualifications in Timothy and Titus). Other NT terminology for these same leaders:

- Pastors
- Shepherds
- Bishops / overseers

Test: Are all of these names (and accompanying functions) applied equally across the board to your leadership? Are there different types of ordination required for different leaders within your elder board?

(Remember: it is not enough to have a plurality ... they must all meet the biblical qualifications. It is also very possible to have a plurality that is not performing the functions of shepherding and oversight and teaching, etc.)

– **There must not be any hierarchy within this plurality body.** There is no biblical separate office of senior pastor that is distinct in some way from the other elders. Early on in church history, Ignatius argued for such a distinction – hence the development of the office of the single bishop who ruled over a number of local congregations. But this was an historical perversion ... not the model we see in the NT churches. (Have you ever wondered why Paul in his numerous epistles never singled out one senior pastor and addressed him in some unique fashion – independently from the other leaders?)

– **That is not to say that all will function exactly the same.** Your giftedness still determines your area of primary ministry. For example, all the elders will not share equally in the preaching. All of the elders do not have to be paid. (You can certainly have non-elders who are paid staff as well.) But when it comes to authority and oversight, the elders must function as a team.

– The system must operate with **proper checks and balances** so that the opinion of one man does not bully the flock. It is the Gentiles whose ministry style involves lording it over others (**Luke 22:25**). God's ways are not our ways. Christ came to implement **servant-style leadership**.

Much more could be said .. but this is not an attempt at a comprehensive treatise. From personal testimony I can only express my frustration and disappointment at the number of church fellowships that have grappled with these fundamental distinctives in theory, but have failed to maintain these principles in practice – arguing more from the standpoint of **expediency** than from that of **NT design and practice**.

Caveat: Be careful to understand what I am NOT saying here:

- I am not saying that Senior Pastors are not ministering from a platform of Integrity – it depends on their biblical conviction regarding church government.
- I am not saying that Senior Pastors cannot be effective as servant leaders or that they necessarily are lording it over their flock.
- I am not saying that God is not blessing the ministry of Senior Pastor led churches – that is by far the dominant church model.
- The distinctive I am trying to make a case for is just one principle of a complex combination of intertwined biblical convictions that determine your ministry model.